

Edison Miller

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RELIGIOUS CHARACTER OF
ABRAHAM LINCOLN

LECTURE

WRITTEN BY

JAMES M. SCOVEL,

IN HIS LIFETIME,

AND READ BY

PROF. AMOS H. FLAKE,

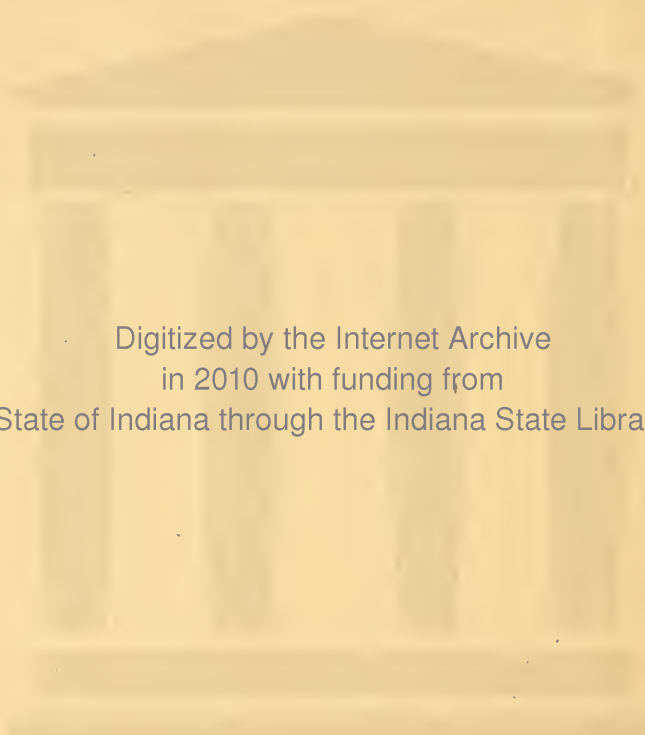
AT THE

LINCOLN SERVICE,

IN THE

HADDONFIELD METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH,

SUNDAY EVENING, FEBRUARY 14TH, 1909



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RELIGIOUS CHARACTER OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

LECTURE BY JAMES M. SCOVEL.

*Read by Prof. Amos H. Flake at the Lincoln Service in the
Haddonfield Methodist Episcopal Church, Sunday
evening, February 14th, 1909.*

The philosophic student of human nature is many-sided in his view of life. He reasons in no narrow circle, but from and on widely divergent and convergent lines. A great character of history is, to him, a great study. What constitutes such greatness, what elements make such a composite, and what faculty most largely predominates, is to him an ever increasing study and absorbing interest.

The religious element of our nature is the factor, after all, most largely taken into account, for the reason that the *time* of man is colored with the reflections of *eternity*. To be a great man necessarily implies being a good one; and so the subject of this paper had so largely and distinctively a religious character that we present it as the key to all that was great and good in him. In laying, then, the foundation of such a life as that of Mr. Lincoln in religious principles, I am bold to assert—and will make it susceptible of proof—that no President, Senator, Governor or statesman of our Republic, in the past or present, can be more honestly held up to the light of critical opinion, and more safely reviewed in the practical test of man's true natural relations to God.

There are in all men's lives three determining factors for

good or evil. They are the ideals they have formed, the ideas they express, and the influence they exert. The only solid foundation upon which these can rest is a *moral one*. There is therefore, such a thing as natural religion as well as scriptural; that which speaks by nature and through it, as well as that which speaks through grace and by it. Abraham Lincoln was naturally a religious man. The instincts of piety, the moral tendencies of an upright, just man, were his. He was, from his earliest years, a lover of truth and righteousness. He was singularly pure in his moral nature. He possessed great reverence for God. He had the inner refinement of the true gentleman. His outer man might appear ungainly, his manners awkward and far from graceful, but his soul looked through his eyes—the love of a gentle and true heart was expressed in such actions as assured all who came in contact with him, that here, indeed, was one of “Nature’s Noblemen.”

His love for the truth and the constant pursuit of it marked the whole trend of his soul in making his daily life conform with all that was good. So that it was not merely that God sent him into the world with fine natural religious feelings—but also with the antidote to all self-righteousness—in the fact hourly forced into prominence by his own self-examination, of how far short he came to the high standard he set for himself. Hence like all good men, he humbled himself and made confession; he was a man of prayerful spirit.

1. The ideals of Abraham Lincoln were the purest in moral conception—and the greatest in unselfish desire to benefit others. Emerson says in that terse epigrammatic form that is one of his charms:

“Love is omnipresent in nature as motive and reward. Love is our highest word and the synonym of God. Every promise of the soul has innumerable fulfilments; each of its joys ripens into a new want. Nature uncontemnable, flowing, forelooking in the first sentiments of kindness, anticipates already a benevolence which shall lose all particular regards

in its general light. The introduction to this felicity is in a private and tender relation of one to one, which is the enchantment of human life, which like a certain divine rage and enthusiasm seizes on man at one period, and works a revolution in his mind and body; unites him to his race, pledges him to the domestic and civic relations, carries him with new sympathy into nature, enhances the power of the senses, opens the imagination, adds to his character heroic and sacred attributes, establishes marriage and gives permanence to human society."

This principle and feeling Mr. Lincoln largely possessed, but its expression was peculiar to himself. He was the best-known and the least-known man by his contemporaries of any public character of his day. The closest business and social connections he formed failed to open his heart with entire satisfaction to his friends. He was the most contradictory in the impressions he produced upon those who knew him best, of any man of his times. He lived in a world peculiarly his own. He could not be, it was said, a Christian in the sense in which Christianity is believed and taught. The doctrines from the simplest faith to the sublimest belief were practically "old wives' fables." He never got nearer Christianity than Theodore Parker, and every mystery of man's sin and fall and Christ's incarnation and redemption were "as though he heard it not." The proof of this is furnished by two who, perhaps, better knew his mind on these questions than any others, namely, his wife and his law partner—for twenty years, William H. Herndon. In Herndon's life and personal recollections of Lincoln, he tells us of the latter that in 1834, while living in New Salem, and before he took up the legal profession, he was surrounded by a class of people exceedingly liberal in matters of religion. Volney's "Ruins" and Paine's "Age of Reason" passed from hand to hand, and furnished food for the discussions in the tavern and village store.

Mr. Lincoln read both these books and thus assimilated

them into his own being. That they produced the usual effect they were designed to have, we must admit from the testimony of some of his most intimate friends. But that they had the lasting influence on his religious character asserted we cannot assent to.

For a long time both in public and private life, speculative opinion, rather than solid convictions, was the condition of Mr. Lincoln's mind. Fond of fact, he had a fear of faith, that had little or any ground of rational conclusion.

He carried, in the earlier days we speak of, his sceptical views so far as to "prepare an extended essay—called by many a book, in which he made an argument against Christianity, striving to prove that the Bible was not inspired, and therefore not God's revelation, and that Jesus Christ was not the Son of God." Happily, for our great President and all concerned, it was never published and we believe he lived to see, and had the manliness to confess that, while there was much in churches he objected to, and much in Christians to criticize, he ceased to play with "edged tools" and his natural reverence for God became a divine homage of his Son. This, I think, is verified by the following incident which occurred during the war:

A lady connected with the Christian Commission had several interviews with Mr. Lincoln, consulting him in reference to her humane duties. At the close of one of these interviews, the President said to her with that *childlike frankness and simplicity so characteristic* of him, "Madam, I have formed a high opinion of your Christian character, and now as we are alone, I have a mind to ask you to give me, in brief, your idea of what constitutes a true Christian." She replied at some length, stating in substance that, in her judgment, it consisted of a conviction of one's own sinfulness and weakness, and personal need of a Saviour for strength and support; that views of mere doctrine might and would differ, but when one was really brought to feel his need of divine help, and to seek *the aid of the Holy Spirit*

for strength and guidance, it was satisfactory evidence of his having been born again.

With deep emotion Mr. Lincoln replied: "If what you have told me be really a correct view of this great subject, I think I can say with sincerity that I hope I am a Christian. I had lived until my boy Willie died, without realizing fully these things. That blow overwhelmed me. It showed me my weakness as I had never felt it before; and if I can take what you have stated as a test, I think I can safely say that I know something of that change of which you speak; and I will further add that it has been my intention for some time, at a suitable opportunity, to make a *public religious profession*."

Thus, by the humble, modest statement of this noble woman, Mr. Lincoln was confirmed in the faith of the Gospel, comforted in his soul by the Holy Spirit, and decided as to his public duty of making an open confession of Christ.

The highest ideal of Abraham Lincoln's life was to leave the world better than he found it. "Oh, how hard it is," said he one day, "to die and not leave the world any better for one's little life in it!" Thank God, this man neither lived nor died in vain. He set himself to a purpose of life which carried within it the noblest ambition, the sublimest courage, the profoundest consciousness of a divinely ordained work that ever man consecrated himself to. Who can read such words as he uttered without feeling his soul stirred within him, when speaking in 1859, of the slave power, he said: "Broken by it I, too, may be, bow to it, I never will. The probability that we may fail in the struggle ought not to deter us from the support of a cause which I deem to be just, and it shall not deter me. If ever I feel the soul within me elevate and expand to those dimensions not wholly unworthy of the Almighty Architect, it is when I contemplate the cause of my country, deserted by all the world besides, and I standing up boldly and alone, and hurling defiance at her victorious oppressors. Here without contemplating con-

sequences, before high Heaven, and in the face of the world, I swear eternal fidelity to the just cause, as I deem it, of the land of my life, my liberty and my love."

This was the mountain life among surrounding hills. Mark the language he uses at his second inauguration. Never was utterance given to loftier sentiments, more heartfelt humility before the God of nations than fell at this time from Abraham Lincoln's lips. Speaking of the parties arrayed against each other in the war he said, "Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men may dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of the other men's faces; but let us judge not, that we may not be judged. The prayers of both could not be answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes; 'woe unto the world because of offenses, for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh!' If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses, which in the providence of God must needs come, but which, having continued its appointed time, he now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible offense as the woe due to those by whom the offense came: shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may soon pass away. Yet if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsmen's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn by the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword—as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, 'The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.' With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness for the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him

who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and orphans; to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations."

Mr. Lincoln had a profound and abiding faith in God's providential government of the world. His belief in this respect was of a more fatalistic character than Christianity itself. To find out the will of God and follow the leadings of the spirit was his prayerful desire. He honestly envied those who seemed to have more light on natural questions of policy and government than he could attain. "I hope," said a clergyman to him one day, "that the Lord is on our side." "I am not concerned at all about that," was Mr. Lincoln's reply, "for I know that the Lord is *always* on the side of right; but it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord's side."

Whatever then, may be said of his earlier years of scepticism, no one will question Mr. Lincoln's later ones of Christian belief. His circular letter to the army, urging the observance of the Lord's day, and reverence for the name of God, the fearful trials of his office which so rapidly developed this noble man's religious nature, are seen in the words he uttered, "I have been driven," he said, "many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for that day. I should be the most presumptuous blockhead upon this footstool, if I for one day thought I could discharge the duties which have come upon me since I came into this place, without the aid and enlightenment of One who is wiser and stronger than all others." The ideal, then, of Mr. Lincoln was to build up a human-independent and God-dependent character. He believed in a far higher and better sense than Napoleon that he was "a man of destiny." To develop a character in conformity with such a sublime mission as Almighty providence had sent him upon, required what nature and grace joined to give him, the elements of: an honest ambition, good, sound common sense,

great tenacity of purpose, high moral principles, strong reasoning facilities, tenderness of heart and profound faith in his calling and election to high, national and patriotic work.

Thackeray defines the law of spiritual harvest in this wise: "We sow a thought and reap an act; sow an act and reap a habit; sow a habit and reap a character; sow a character and reap a destiny." How true that is for good or evil.

Mr. Lincoln was pre-eminently a *thinking man*. His thoughts were deeply reflective ones; it was in no shallow pool he waded, but in broad, deep rivers he swam. His thoughts were far in advance of his time; his ideas of the fitness of things wise and prudent, sagacious and conservative. The thought of emancipation was sown long years before the harvest of the act of emancipation was gathered. His acts of justice, generosity, truth and righteousness produced a harvest of habit and orderly sequence that, again, as the "seed of God," he sowed to such good purpose as to reap a character moral and religious in its purity—great in its intellectual power, broad and comprehensive in its political insight and oversight, charitable and magnanimous in its judgment and unselfish in its spirit and aim. This character was bound to reap a destiny—that of winning the love of millions of people, and the admiration and esteem of the whole world.

That such a man as this could be addicted to retailing vile and vulgar stories is incredible. That some of the incidents of his life were far from refined, we admit. But that he was inherently a pure-minded, moral, healthy-toned man is now everywhere conceded.

Mr. Lincoln was very remarkable for his fund of anecdote. He always had his little story to illustrate any point, and the illustration was often found to contain resistless argument.

Mr. Carpenter, a distinguished artist, who spent six months almost constantly in the society of the President, and

that of the most intimate daily acquaintance, says: "Mr. Lincoln, I am convinced, has been greatly wronged in this respect. Every foul-mouthed man in the country gave currency to the slime and filth of his own imagination by attributing it to the President. It is but simple justice to his memory that I should state that, during the entire stay of my period in Washington, after witnessing his intercourse with nearly all the classes of men, embracing Governors, Senators and members of Congress, officers of the army and intimate friends, I cannot recollect to have heard him relate a circumstance to any one of them which would have been out of place uttered in a lady's drawing-room." And this testimony is not unsupported by that of others well entitled to consideration. Dr. Stone, his family physician, came in one day to see my studio. Sitting in front of the President, with whom he did not sympathize politically, he remarked with much feeling: "It is the province of a physician to probe deeply in the interior lives of men, and I affirm that Mr. Lincoln is the purest-hearted man with whom I ever came in contact." Secretary Seward, who, of the Cabinet officers, was probably the most intimate with the President, expressed the same sentiment in still stronger language. He once said to Rev. Dr. Bellows, "Mr. Lincoln is the best man I ever knew." We think you will agree with us that such testimony now presented will settle the question of what the real Mr. Lincoln was. Here we have an eminent artist painting his picture, an eminent physician prescribing for his family, an eminent statesman administering with him the affairs of the nation, and all three, thrown into the most intimate daily intercourse with this great man, bear unanimous testimony to the "soul of goodness" he possessed.

The fact is, Mr. Lincoln had largely a vein of humor that, practically, saved his life to the nation. His story telling was simply the safety valve of his nature. Let the following incident confirm this assertion. In one of the darkest hours of the war a member of his Cabinet called upon him

to confer respecting some weighty matters. The President commenced relating a ludicrous anecdote. "Please, Mr. President," said the Secretary remonstratingly, "I did not come here this morning to hear stories. It is too serious a time." The President paused for a moment, and then said, "Sit down, sir. I respect your feelings. You cannot be more anxious than I am constantly. And I say to you now that if it were not for this occasional vent I should die." This confession of the President is so well known now as a fact of the man's nature that no one questions its truth. Many a man's reason has been saved by some simple harmless joke or story. I have in mind the experience of an eminent ministerial friend who told me that on one occasion he was so completely prostrated with the work of his church and the demands of the community, his only mind relief was in reading for some hours the funniest story of one of the greatest of our humorists.

Believing, then, in the real religious greatness of Mr. Lincoln, one can readily see what his influence is and has been. No statesman of this land or any other holds a higher place among the highest intelligences and the popular minds of today. The more his character is sifted, the more his intellect is tested, the more his public and private acts are scrutinized, the more radiant does he shine on the pages of history, and greater reflects glory on the nation.

The nation's past thirty years, and the future generations of its life owe, and will owe, its greatness very largely to this man's *worth and work*.

When Mr. Lincoln issued his famous emancipation proclamation on the first day of January, 1863, the *London Spectator*, one of the greatest newspaper reviews of the world, said of this proclamation: "We cannot read it without a renewed conviction that it is the noblest political document known to history, and should have for the nation, and the statesmen he left behind him, something of a sacred and almost prophetic character. Surely none was ever written un-

der a stranger sense of the reality of God's government, and certainly none written in a period of passionate conflict ever so completely excluded the partiality of victorious faction, and breathed so pure a strain of mingled justice and mercy."

The death of this great and good man is yet too painful a subject to dwell upon. And yet when we reflect on the circumstances attending it, "the sudden cutting off," the surroundings of it with all their dramatic character—the complete unconsciousness from which he was never to awake in this world—the cowardly way in which the foul assassin did his work, the wide-spread conspiracy to paralyze the nation's life, the terrible grief of a nation when millions of strong men wept, it cannot but be interesting and profitable if we add a few reflections which, as a sprig of heather, we would lay on his grave.

In the full maturity of his powers and fame, Abraham Lincoln came to his grave. He is indeed our martyred President. "He died to make men free." He was looked upon as the incarnation of all that policy that changed the face of the nation and also that of the earth. When a great Republic like ours declares freedom forever to all races, dyes with its own blood the robe it would wear, and pays the penalty by the sword it owes to the lash; when, humbled to the dust, she cries to the Almighty for forgiveness, then rises and decrees that "all persons held as slaves * * * are and henceforth shall be free," we need not wonder that "hell broke loose," and his death arrow ever loving a shining mark, pierced the clearest brain and stilled the throbbings of one of the most loyal, loving, tender and true hearts ever given to a nation.

Speaking to Mr. Herndon, he said: "There are no accidents in my philosophy. Every effect must have its cause. The past is the cause of the present, and the present will be the cause of the future. All these are links in the endless chain stretching from the finite to the infinite." How much he believed in the freedom of the will may be inferred from

the philosophy he presents. To distinguish between cause and condition is worth examination in the line of Mr. Lincoln's religious belief. What distinction did he make in this matter? Important, it certainly is, if we would truly estimate the forces at work in his spiritual life. Sometimes but small difference is made between two such vital influences as "cause and condition" in human life; and in order to properly understand their inherent difference, we gladly acknowledge our indebtedness to Professor E. H. Johnson, D. D., of Crozer Theological Seminary, who, in an article in "A Shag-Bark Science," published in the Baptist Commonwealth, speaking of the practical agreement between Jonathan Edwards of the last century, and the physiologists of this, though reasoning it out in a different way, says, as to this distinction: "Mr. Lincoln only wanted a certain condition or environment to carry out great purposes he felt his life irrevocably bound up with, and he believed that such a condition of things would develop themselves at the right time and in the right way, that his patient waiting for 'the time and tide' of God's purpose was one of the sublimest traits in his character." When a deputation waited upon him in Washington to urge the immediate issuance of his emancipation proclamation and among other reasons advanced, said God had revealed this to them as the time to do it, Mr. Lincoln expressed his surprise that they should have such a revelation and he none; for surely, if God desired it now, He would have revealed it to the only one able to carry it into effect. He saw more in the force of Mr. Seward's argument to delay the proclamation till some great victories had crowned the Union armies, than in all the "answers to prayers" the minister claimed, when he had himself been equally earnest in his petitions to God. He waited patiently till the way was opened by that Divine Being whose sovereignty was never to be questioned or wisdom gainsaid. Ere the day of his eternity was to dawn, and the shadows of this life flee away, he was profoundly impressed with the limited conditions as

to the time and circumstances under which he lived. And while they seemed to say, "What thou doest, do quickly," he knew the evil involved in haste, and the quieter voice of inner conviction was listened to, "Not so fast, not so far." But that his tragic death seemed to be an almost constant presence, will be apparent from public words as well as private conversation. When about to assume the duties of the presidency, and on the eve of leaving his old home he was never to see again, he said to Mr. Herndon: "I am sick of office holding already, and I shudder when I think of the tasks that are still ahead." He said the sorrow of parting from his old associations was deeper than most persons would imagine, but it was more marked in his case because of the feeling which had become irrepressible, that he would never return alive. I argued against the thought, characterizing it as an illusionary notion not in harmony or keeping with the popular ideal of a President. "But it is in keeping with my philosophy," was his quick retort. In his farewell address at Springfield among other things he said: "To you, dear friends, I owe all that I have, and all that I am. All the strange checkered past seems to crowd now upon my mind. Today I leave you. I go to assume a task more difficult than that which devolved upon Washington. Unless the great God who assisted him shall be with me and aid me, I must fail; but if the same omniscient mind and almighty arm that directed and protected him shall guide and support me, I shall not fail—I shall succeed. Let us all pray that the God of our fathers may not forsake us now. To Him I commend you all. Permit me to ask that with equal sincerity and faith you will invoke His wisdom and guidance for me. With these words I must leave you, for how long I know not. Friends one and all, I must now bid you an affectionate farewell."

Much as we differ with Mr. Herndon in his religious estimate of Mr. Lincoln's character, we will agree in the following beautiful tribute he renders to both his goodness and

greatness. Speaking of the President's assassination, he says: "In the death of Lincoln, the South, prostrate and bleeding, lost a friend; and his unholy taking off at the very hour of the assured supremacy of the Union cause ran the iron into the heart of the North. His sun went down suddenly, and overwhelmed the country in a darkness which was felt by every heart; but far up the clouds sprang apart, and soon the golden light flooded the heavens with radiance, illuminated every uncovered brow with the hope of a fair to-morrow."

His name will ever be the watchword of liberty. His work is finished and sealed forever with the veneration given to the blood of the martyrs. Yesterday a man reviled and abused, a target for the shafts of malice and hatred; today an apostle; yesterday a power; today a prestige, sacred, irresistible. The life and tragic death of Mr. Lincoln mark an epoch in history, from which dates the unqualified annunciation by the American people of the greatest truth in the Bible of Republicanism, the very keystone of that arch of human rights which is destined to overshadow and remodel every government upon the earth. The glorious brightness of that upper world as it welcomed his faint and bleeding spirit, broke through upon the earth at his exit. It was the dawn of a day growing brighter as the grand army of freedom follows in the march of time.

